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ABSTRACT

Findings of a study that explored the micropolitical elements inherent in interactions between either prospective or practicing supervisors and teachers in successful instructional conferences are presented in this paper. Micropolitics refers to the use of formal and informal power by individuals and groups to achieve their organizational goals. Methodology involved transcript analysis of over 100 supervisor-teacher postobservation conferences, which were included in the database of a larger study conducted in a variety of public schools in the southwestern and southeastern United States. Findings indicate that attaining deep reflection and free exchange in conference situations is difficult to achieve and is profoundly complicated by political factors. Four major micropolitical strategies that can constrain or facilitate conferences were used to define conference interaction--personal orientation, conversational congruence, formal authority, and situational variables. In successful conferences, supervisors and teachers used personal orientation and conversational congruence strategies. Supervisors also provided nonthreatening environments for teachers. In less successful conferences, supervisors used formal authority and situational variables as political strategies. The recommendation is made to include information on micropolitical skills in administrator preparation programs and to make administrators aware of the differences between control-oriented and empowerment strategies. One table is included. (Contains 43 references.) (LMI)

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The Micropolitics of Successful Supervisor-Teacher Interaction in Instructional Conferences

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The Micropolitics of Successful Supervisor-Teacher Interaction in Instructional Conferences

In this chapter, we report a study in which we explored the micropolitical elements inherent in interactions between either prospective or practicing supervisors (i.e., administrators or instructional supervisors) and teachers in successful instructional conferences. Our results suggest that attaining deep reflection and free exchange in conference situations--recognized goals of the supervisory conference (Garman, 1990)--is, at best, difficult to achieve and is profoundly complicated by political factors. The results of the study are examined in terms of new conceptual ideas about the micropolitics of conference interaction. Practical implications of the study data are also discussed.

Research on Supervisory Conferences

The bureaucratic nature of the supervisory conference is invariably reflected in the power, authority, and control conferred on the hierarchically defined position of the supervisor. Most current research on the relationship between supervisors and teachers reinforces this bureaucratic perspective. This perspective assumes that the supervisor's technical proficiency (e.g., contrived, mechanical, or intentional use of such factors as empathy, positive prefixes to begin verbal responses, conference analysis, or evaluation systems) rather than the participants' collaboration (authentic

or genuine interaction--an alternative to supervisor control) leads to teacher growth and development (Holland, 1989).

Although there are a variety of approaches to supervisory practice, most are grounded in paradigms reflecting the perspectives of positivism, phenomenology, or critical theory (May & Zimpher, 1986). For example, the collaborative approach, first posited by Cogan (1973) in his original conception of clinical supervision and supported by such writers as Eisner (1982), Garman (1982), Sergiovanni (1982), and Glickman (1990), challenged traditional approaches to supervision. More recently, Garman (1982, 1990) has questioned the viability of the "ritualistic" instructional supervisory conference; she has called for a transformation to genuineness and mutual problem solving in the conference. Moreover, studies of conference interaction have reinforced Blumberg and Amidon's (1965) early research, which suggested the importance of open-ended, collaborative, and nondirective behaviors in supervisory conferences (see also Waite, this volume).

Despite such developments, there is little systematic research on the supervisory conference. This fact, in addition to recent commentary in the professional literature (see, for example, Holland, 1989), has generated renewed interest in verbal interaction in conferences. The small body of research produced primarily during the last decade indicated that supervisory conferences are dominated by supervisors and encompass narrow concerns (Zimpher, deVoss, & Nott, 1980); provide short, prescriptive feedback to teachers (Blumberg & Cusick, 1970);

threaten teacher self-esteem and self-determination (Roberts, 1992a); reveal gender differences regarding power and behavior control (Kraft, 1991); show unequal power relationships (Retallick, 1990; Roberts, 1992b); and lack teacher reflection or self-evaluation (Gitlin, Ogawa, & Rose, 1984; Zeicher & Liston, 1985). Several writers have recently argued that these and other power-related issues in schooling may best be resolved through "critical" practices of educational administration and instructional supervision (Bates, 1984; Foster, 1984; Smyth, 1985, 1988, 1990).

Current studies focusing on teacher reflection and engagement have also contributed to our understanding of the supervisory conference. Retallick (1990), for example, using a critical-inquiry method, analyzed conference discourse by applying depth hermeneutics. He described supervisors' and teachers' talk during postconference discussions of thoughts underlying conference interaction. This constituted a form of "reflection on the reflection," which targeted participants' language and communication structures.

In related work, Zeichner and Liston (1985) expanded van Manen's (1977) ideas about teacher reflection. Van Manen's work encompassed Schon's (1983) and Habermas's (1971) related concepts regarding reflection and analytic, hermeneutic, and critical reasoning. The researcher employed philosophical rather than theoretical methods to study practical reasoning during supervisory conferences. These and similar studies have revealed dismally low levels of reflection, reasoning, critical inquiry,

and symmetrical communication in supervisory conference interaction.

In summary, studies of supervisory conferences raise serious questions about a conference's contribution to collegiality and teacher growth. This body of research suggests instead that social and political power regimes (St. Maurice, 1987) dramatically undermine conference success. The aforementioned studies explicitly and implicitly point to the problematic, political nature of the supervisory conference.

This chapter presents an analysis of supervisor-teacher interaction in conferences, an analysis generated from a micropolitical perspective. To our knowledge, there exists no theoretical or empirical work on the instructional conference using such a perspective.

A Micropolitical Framework for Investigating the Supervisory Conference

Blase (1991a) has demonstrated the theoretical and practical import of research focusing on the principal's micropolitical orientation vis-à-vis teachers. Among other things, he has shown that the political actions and purposes of administrators strongly affect a number of aspects of teacher performance (Blase, 1988c). Ball (1987) has linked school heads' use of control-oriented, didactic, and proactive micropolitical strategies (including, for example, the manipulation of language, roles, structures, agendas, and participation) to such outcomes as teacher frustration and fatalism. Micropolitical research in

general has suggested that a multiplicity of organizational factors are critical to understanding micropolitical processes and structures in schools (Ball, 1987; Blase, 1988a, 1988b, 1991a; Hoyle, 1986; Iannaccone, 1975; Marshall & Scribner, 1991). Politics, as the allocation and use of power, is reflected in language, and "communication is inseparable from it" (Lakoff, 1985, p. 13).

Taken together, research on micropolitics in schools and on supervisory instructional conferences implies that the power dynamics between supervisors and teachers may be fundamental to understanding conference interaction. Blase's (1991b) comprehensive definition of micropolitics was used to interpret data drawn from supervisory conferences.

> *Micropolitics refers to the use of formal and informal power by individuals and groups to achieve their goals in organizations. In large part, political actions result from perceived differences between individuals and groups, coupled with the motivation to use power to influence and/or protect. Although such actions are consciously motivated, any action, consciously or unconsciously motivated, may have political 'significance' in a given situation. Both cooperative and conflictive actions and processes are part of the realm of micropolitics. Moreover, macro- and micropolitical factors frequently interact. (p.11)*

An Analysis of Conference Interaction

The primary purpose of the study reported here was to describe the micropolitics of conference interaction in terms of verbal and paraverbal elements (i.e., interruptions, overlaps, incomplete utterances). These features constitute metamessages about the intentions associated with verbal messages and about relationships between participants' behaviors (see, for example, van Dijk, 1985). The following questions were examined by the study:

1. What events in supervisor-teacher interaction reflect political constructs (e.g., purposes, values, roles, influence) (Blase, 1991)?
2. What strategies and counterstrategies do supervisors and teachers use to influence each other in supervisory conferences, and what are the specific factors (i.e., practices) identified with these strategies?
3. How do micropolitical strategies vary in frequency and type by the demographics of experience and gender of conference participants?
4. What consequences or outcomes are associated with micropolitical interaction in conferences (Blase, 1991a)?

Method

The study reported in this chapter is part of a larger research project conducted with prospective and practicing administrators and supervisors in a variety of public schools in the southwestern and southeastern states. The data bank generated by the study consists of over one hundred (100) different cases of supervisor-teacher dyads for which written reports documenting case backgrounds, recall interview transcripts, transcriptions of conference video- and audio-recordings, and demographic data were collected.

The findings presented here were drawn from an analysis of the political dynamics (consistent with Blase's definition) of twenty dyads as the participants engaged in postobservation instructional (feedback) conferences. These cases were selected

on the basis of a preliminary content analysis of data as well as an attempt to maximize variation among participants with regard to experience and gender (Bogdan & Biklin, 1992; Bogdan & Taylor, 1975). Those conferences perceived by both participants as nonthreatening and conducive to professional growth were considered to be successful, or effective, conferences.

Transcriptions of supervisor-teacher postobservation conferences were coded for micropolitical strategies. Critical constructs and concepts (e.g., strategy, influence, purpose/goal, and effects) from the micropolitical perspective (Blase, 1991a) were used to guide analyses of supervisor-teacher interaction in conference. Using Blase's definition of micropolitics and protocols for inductive-grounded research (Bogdan & Biklin, 1992; Bogdan & Taylor, 1975), coding categories were generated from emergent recurrent patterns.

The transcripts are discussed in terms of the micropolitical factors that appear to influence instructional-conference interaction. Those strategies that were determined to be interactive (i.e., affecting each other and used in combinations, thereby increasing or decreasing a participant's overall influence) and were used by both conference participants are emphasized in this analysis.

In the sample dyads, male and female supervisors representing a range of supervisory experience from beginner (within the first year of supervisory work; in some cases, true "novices" engaged in their very first supervisory conference) to experienced supervisors met with male and female teachers also

representing a range of teaching experience. All supervisors had completed a classroom observation of the teacher, during which they made verbatim transcripts as well as anecdotal records of selected class events. None of the supervisors was responsible for formal evaluations of the teachers with whom they conferenced, although a few of the supervisors were formally appointed administrators (assistant principal or administrative assistant).

Political Elements of Conference Interaction: Strategies and Related Factors

Analysis of instructional conference interaction between supervisors and teachers demonstrates that a range of factors influence the political dynamics of the conference. Specifically, this analysis produced four major micropolitical strategies: personal orientations, conversational congruence, formal authority, and situational variables.

The data suggest that each of these strategies facilitated or constrained supervisory conferences and that the two latter strategies were enacted primarily (but not exclusively) by the supervisors. Factors associated with each of these four strategies are also described below (see Table 1). Together, these strategies and related factors constitute a working framework of micropolitical conference interaction. It should be mentioned that examination of the study data with regard to gender revealed no differences. This, of course, may be a function of the small sample size.

Insert Table 1 About Here

Reflecting personal orientation to define conference interaction. The complexity and reciprocity (i.e., conference participants' perception of the degree to which views are shared and equal involvement exists) of supervisor-teacher interaction wee most evident in the strategy of reflecting personal orientations in conference talk. Both conference participants used cognitive and affective frameworks and, to lesser degrees, interpersonal history and agendas to advance or to limit conversation. To illustrate, cognitive frameworks--the academic, social, cultural, and political realities of participants, which are shaped by formal education and experiences--were evident as participants espoused, supported, or contradicted opinions and beliefs about teaching and supervising:

Teacher: That day I chose to use WRAP, which is a language program developed by a linguistic systems company.

* * * * *

Supervisor: One of the things I think as teachers that we do on a daily basis is a lot of diagnosis. This is the purpose of the [observation] process...to be able to reflect back on our own teaching and do that same diagnosis.

* * * * *

Teacher: That was just another indicator to me that this lesson was too long.

* * * * *

Supervisor: Another thing that I know you're real interested in is having them do "experience stories."

By reflecting personal cognitive frameworks during conference talk, participants were able to impose certain realities and boundaries on interaction; this strongly influenced improvement plans made during conferences.

The efficacy of individual philosophy, an aspect of cognitive frameworks, was apparent as teachers attempted to defend, explain, and expand on their teaching practices, particularly when these practices were questioned by supervisors during conferences. These comments by three different teachers are illustrative:

Teacher: I'm not an advocate of performance objectives philosophically. I do not believe the teacher should have three things, that students will do that, and they will do that by the end of the day. My thing is a more long-range approach. I have certain goals.

* * * * *

Teacher: I don't want these kids walking out after one day saying, "Wait a minute!" I don't want Hitler in here.

* * * * *

Teacher: I want them to learn the skills, but more than that it's more the philosophy of what I want them to learn: to be able to sit in the classroom, know how to act, be able to feel good about education and feel good about learning.

Personal expectations and achievement motivation, further examples of cognitive frameworks, were noticeably more salient for beginning supervisors than for experienced supervisors. Less frequently, the data emphasized the importance of <u>teachers'</u>

ideals. This is particularly interesting in light of the motivating effect of professional goals. The comments of three supervisors and a teacher illustrate this point:

Supervisor: The purpose of this is for me to gain an experience.

* * * * *

Supervisor: I hope I was able in talking with you, to have you either learn or relearn something.

* * * * *

Supervisor: One of the things about teaching is that we're so isolated, and there aren't other adults that can come in and say, "Good job!" and/or, "I learned a lot."

* * * * *

Teacher: That's one of the areas I'd really like to work on--[students] having more of the experiences that will relate directly to them.

Appeals to participants' affective frameworks--feelings shaped by one's values, moral commitments, and purposes--were often reflected as praise about excellent performance and specific teaching behaviors; achievements related to deeply held beliefs or values were profoundly meaningful to teachers. However, in the case of an unsuccessful conference, a volley of escalating disagreements and interruptions, accompanied by intensely negative emotionality was evident as in the following teacher-supervisor interactions:

Supervisor: One of the things I really liked abut the lesson was the way you explained the vocabulary. I liked the way you did the analogy of the witch's vat.

* * * * *

Supervisor: Do you really feel that they came away learning what you wanted them to learn that day?

* * * * *

Teacher: I don't agree.
Supervisor: You don't have to agree.
Teacher: I don't agree, No. But I'm just telling you...
Supervisor: --OK, but from my notes...
Teacher: --Alright!
Supervisor: --OK! But from where I was...

The introduction of negative affective elements in conference talk invariably led to adverse emotional effects; feelings of failure and conflict were linked to hostility and resentment. In contrast, feelings of success were linked to motivation, and expressions indicating shared values, commitments, and purposes seemed to enhance rapport between participants.

In successful conferences, supervisors and teachers tended to agree on the use of instructional methods, the value of methods, and the reasons for practicing particular methods. In these conferences, participants often appealed to interpersonal histories and alluded to their shared knowledge of events or shared experiences to support an argument or facilitate a discussion. Congruence between individual agendas (participants' long- and short-term goals and objectives regarding instructional improvement) was also observed in successful collaborative conferences.

The following counterexample to successful conferences is illustrative. In this case an overloaded teacher repeatedly

lobbied the supervisor for either smaller classes or the assistance of an aide or volunteer. To explain his weak teaching, he declared to the supervisor, "The weaknesses [you mention] would evaporate if I had one class, one class [fewer students] at a time." These words were wasted, since his and the supervisor's agendas were far too different for him to broach the subject of overcrowded classes and have a successful discussion of the issue.

In summary, the study data demonstrated that the personal orientations of conference participants, manifest and latent, conscious and unconscious, can significantly constrain or facilitate conference interaction. Conference participants indicated their awareness and sensitivity to the impact of declaring personal orientations, whether this occurred by drawing on a cognitive framework or an affective framework. Participants' interpersonal histories and agendas also affected conference interaction, although to a lesser degree.

Reflecting conversational congruence to define conference interaction. Supervisors and teachers used the strategy of reflecting conversational congruence in conference talk. The goal was to define talk in terms of meanings, assumptions, semantics, and credibility. When meanings (of approaches, concepts, ideas) and assumptions abut instruction were made explicit and were shared by participants, conferences were seen as successful, and teachers were more inclined to follow through on action plans. One teacher, for example, was enthusiastic

about the supervisor's proposal to use a special observation strategy to isolate data about the relative level of attention she gave to various students. It was clear to her that the supervisor understood her situation and her needs.

By comparison, silence or resistance ("I don't understand what you're referring to") often resulted when participants erroneously assumed that meanings were shared. Shared assumptions about the purpose of the conference itself or how best to work with children were often made explicit:

Teacher: I can't tell you how much help it's been to me. It made me aware how little time I spend with that child...

* * * * *

Supervisor: The purpose of the appraisal process is to do that same thing, to reflect on our teaching and do that same diagnosis.

Participants in successful conferences also demonstrated semantic congruence; that is, educational jargon, professional terminology, research references, and general talk about teaching and learning tended to be defined similarly. Although it was difficult to determine whether semantic congruence derived from prior familiarity/established trust between the conference participants or whether it emerged from direct attempts to establish semantic congruence, deliberate attempts at semantic manipulation were common in unsuccessful conferences:

Supervisor: We'll see if you are improving.
Teacher: ...if I am improving?
Supervisor: If you are...You know...We talked about how to make your situation better.
Teacher: ...to see if the <u>situation</u> is improving. I prefer that way of putting it.
Supervisor: OK. If the situation is improving.

Furthermore, more devious reasons for seeking semantic congruence may exist (e.g., to curry favor, to feign deference, to resist oppressive ideologies). This contrasting negative side of semantic congruence raised a haunting specter of supervisory power and control over professional teachers, subtly achieved through the use of language.

Lastly, it was evident that supervisors and teachers referred to their own or each other's <u>professional credibility</u> (expertise or lack of expertise) to facilitate or obstruct conference conversation. Beginning supervisors, in particular, searched for and often directly requested confirmation of their credibility:

Supervisor: I really like your approach. Us coaches were never ashamed to go find out who's doing it well.

* * * * *

Supervisor: How do you feel about me, with limited teaching experience, giving you feedback?

* * * * *

Teacher: I think that you're very qualified to do that, and to look at those two things I gave you.

As the following examples demonstrate, less effective beginning supervisors tended to make excuses for their lack of

experience. They also emphasized their own expertise and frequently asserted how they would have done things differently.

Supervisor: These codes are to help me, cause . . . I'm not an expert at using them.

* * * * *

Supervisor: I've been a teacher for 20 years.

* * * * *

Supervisor: I would do . . .

Such behaviors represent a sharp contrast to conferences in which experienced supervisors comfortably interact with unthreatened teachers who desire frequent assistance and peer observation.

Use of formal authority to define conference interaction. Enacted primarily by the supervisor, the third strategy found in conference talk was the use of formal authority; related factors included participants' role expectations, social proximity or distance, status, and rewards.

Although all supervisors used formal authority to influence the conference roles and norms, it was less prominent in successful versus unsuccessful conferences, and for experienced versus beginning supervisors. In addition, beginning supervisors appeared to be especially cautious about exceeding the role expectations teachers hold for them:

Supervisor: I'm not supposed to be looking at that right now [since it wasn't part of our observation plan].
Teacher: But I'd appreciate some suggestions from you.

* * * * *

Supervisor: The conference tries to take a good teacher like yourself to a place where eventually that teacher is growing toward a point of making self-appraisals.

However, the same beginning supervisors frequently mishandled social proximity and distance issues (e.g., using titles and last names to formalize talk or using familiarity to lessen formality) as well as status (e.g., emphasizing their superior position) and thus threatened and alienated teachers. The words of several supervisors illustrate this point:

Supervisor: OK, OK [uses teacher's formal title and last name]. The data is here. It shows they were confused. They were not on task.

* * * * *

Supervisor: So you've accounted for their not perhaps doing exactly what you wanted them to do, but in my mind what I need to know specifically is what you wanted the students to accomplish that day.

* * * * *

Supervisor: If you had done this prior to [now], they should have known that. They shouldn't have had to wait to get this. And it seemed a lot of them really didn't know the words.

* * * * *

Supervisor: What do you think you could have don, knowing they have a short attention span?
Teacher: I don't agree with that at all.
Supervisor: But they don't listen..
Teacher: I don't agree.

Infrequently, supervisors rewarded teachers with personal reinforcement or growth-oriented feedback. Positive remarks from a supervisor, technical success, and improvement in areas of interest appeared to motivate teachers:

Supervisor: I think you're very consistent.
Teacher: I'm strict.
Supervisor: But the kids respect you.

* * * * *

Supervisor: Can you see how this [data-collection instrument] would help you?
Teacher: Uh, huh, I sure can. Yes, it's very interesting to see how they stay on-task, looking at the chart.

Use of situational variables to define conference interaction. The use of situational variables constitutes the fourth strategy for influencing conference interaction. Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss fully the factors associated with this strategy (particularly in regard to contextual elements), several primary factors are noted. Again, this was a strategy enacted primarily--but not exclusively--by supervisors.

Supervisors determined the conference place and its physical arrangement. This, according to the data, influenced the value of the conference to participants. References to the lack of available conference time, the lack of needed teaching resources and materials, and the press of fulfilling district policy requirements regarding teacher evaluation and student behavior were more evident in less successful conferences. The importance of using situational variables to influence conference interaction was most apparent in comments made by various supervisors:

Supervisor: I know your time is very valuable so we're going to move on to our real reason for being here. My objective is . . .

* * * * *

Supervisor: I hope you don't mind me coming in. I know it's the last minute and the last week of school, and we're real busy, but if you don't mind, could we go ahead and have our postconference from my observation?

* * * * *

Supervisor: I know you're moving from campus to campus. I'm here to help you. Feel free to use me any time.

A final factor related to this strategy is controlling or shifting the conference topic. Topic control was typically achieved subtly by experienced supervisors and more explicitly by beginning supervisors. Beginning supervisors often disregard teachers' agendas and teachers' ability to reflect on teaching. For example, two beginning supervisors stated: "I want you to look at the results of the observation instrument and tell me what you see," and "As you will see, a lot of them weren't at their desks."

Experienced supervisors, in contrast, usually requested information from teachers and followed their reflective talk with reinforcement and additional questions ("Tell me a little bit about this class . . . That's really different . . . You like working with these kids . . . That's got to feel mighty good . . . How do you get them to do that? . . . You listed a lot of problems; what do you see as their strengths?"). Such follow-up comments appeared to be critical to reflective talk; in fact, without these comments, conference participants seem to wander aimlessly through subsequent talk.

Inexperienced versus experienced supervisors. This study indicates that both teachers and supervisors extensively use personal orientations and conversational congruence to facilitate or constrain conference interaction. The strategies of formal authority and situational variables, however, were used far more by supervisors than teachers; this is to be expected, given the supervisor's positional authority. Nevertheless, it created problems and constrained dialogue. To achieve a closer look at this phenomenon, the data were disaggregated according to supervisor experience.

Other research has indicated that beginning supervisors are at a disadvantage in comparison with experienced supervisors when conducting instructional conferences (Roberts, 1991, 1992a, 1992b). Similarly, our data point out that beginning supervisors (especially the novices who had virtually no supervisory experience) employed fewer political strategies than their experienced counterparts; they also tended to rely on a limited number of potentially offensive strategies without success.

As suggested above, beginning supervisors' use of micropolitical strategies differed from that of experienced supervisors in every area. The factors of personal orientations they emphasized included their personal expectations (of self) and their achievement motivation ("I'm learning how to do this. . . The purpose is for me to learn how to assist you. . . I was trying to script without a bias. . . I'm trying to take teachers to a place where they are growing. . . I'm not an

expert, but I'm working hard on my skills."). In reflecting conversational congruence, beginning supervisors sought confirmation of their credibility, and they emphasized their knowledge and experience ("You know I've been a teacher for twenty years. . . I can help you improve; that's what we're all about. . . Do you see how my data prove that? and I understand these students and what it takes to teach them."). Such supervisors used formal authority often. They also mishandled social distance/proximity and status and yet were wary of exceeding their perceived role expectations ("I don't mean to tell you how to do your job..."). Beginning supervisors also tended to strictly control the situational variable of discussion topic, moving from topic to topic at will and seemingly without hearing the current conversation.

In addition, beginning supervisors frequently imposed their agendas on the conference. For instance, one teacher initially justified and rationalized his actions, then attempted to avoid traps and "loaded" questions posed by the supervisor, and finally retreated into silence. In this case, the supervisor invoked random use of multiple political strategies to recover from the conflictive episode. However, each of the supervisor's strategies were challenged by the use of a parallel counterstrategy by the angry teacher. Overall, the study data suggest that beginning supervisors have difficulty in tolerating high levels of dissonance in conference interaction; consequently, they escalate their attempts to guide or control ensuing conference interactions.

It was also apparent that beginning supervisors frequently used inappropriate strategies (i.e., conversationally unmatched, and incongruent) during conferences. For example, they emphasized policy expectations rather than teacher instructional expertise. Failure of conferences involving beginning supervisors and inexperienced and experienced teachers was related to technical and political aspects of their orientation; they neither adequately guided nor appropriately controlled the conference. Clearly, beginning supervisors failed more frequently because they seemed to lack a repertoire of strategies, used strategies unmatched to a given conversation, and were dominated by experienced teachers. In contrast, these supervisors succeeded when they worked with (a) inexperienced teachers with sufficient intellectual and practical abilities to change their own behaviors, and (b) experienced teachers who helped them through the morass of conference political interaction.

Successful Conferences: Summary of Findings

In general, the study data suggest that successful conferences--conferences that both participants reported as non-threatening and growth-oriented--differ from less effective conferences in terms of the strategies participants employ. Effective conferences are characterized by supervisors' (as well as teachers') reliance on the strategies of using personal orientations and conversational congruence more than on using

formal authority or situational variables; congruence between the personal orientations of participants' affective and cognitive frameworks and personal expectations of self and others; similar agendas and mutual credibility; and shared meanings, assumptions, role and personal expectations for one another. Use of formal authority as a political strategy is limited to elevating the status of participants to equalize and balance the conference, to build trust, and to foster openness.

Finally, in successful conferences, supervisors tend to provide nonthreatening opportunities for teachers to talk and explore their work. In this "safe haven," risk is tolerated, suggestions are offered in a positive manner, and mutual goals are emphasized. This results in interactions that more closely approximate the ideal of a collaborative, nonevaluative, and reflective conference (Smyth, 1988). Teachers who participate in such conferences reported increased self-esteem and respect for their supervisors.

In relatively less successful conferences, verbal agreements between participants appear to be forced and contrived. For example, participants often lapsed into perfunctory expressions of agreement or silence (e.g., uh huh, mmm, oh yeah). These conferences are characterized by lack of agreement on roles and personal expectations and lack of shared meaning or assumptions about teaching or learning. Moreover, although teachers tend to respond positively to supervisors' initial attempts to engage them in reflection about their work, subsequent strategies used

by supervisors, including authority and situational control, seem to limit the potential of developing viable conference interactions. Generally, in less successful conferences, supervisors encounter teachers' counterstrategies of resistance (see, for example, Waite, this volume); this reduces the probability of addressing the conference goal of reflection. In some conferences, supervisors restore viable interaction by changing from the strategy of formal authority to the strategy of emphasizing personal orientation (i.e., shared assumptions, knowledge, and philosophy).

Defining the Micropolitics of Conference Interaction

The four strategies discussed in this chapter provide a beginning perspective on the micropolitics of supervisor-teacher conferences. In addition, the study data suggest that all four strategies discussed are interactive (affecting each other and used in combinations). Only two of these strategies--reflecting personal orientation and reflecting conversational congruence -- prevail in conferences defined positively by participants. These two strategies are useful not only in creating and maintaining effective instructional conferences but also in salvaging a conference that has deteriorated because of use of the strategies of formal authority or situational variables.

The bureaucracy, policies, traditions, and evaluative orientation of the instructional conference promotes the use of two micropolitical strategies, formal authority, and situational

variables, by supervisors. These strategies are frequently considered inappropriate by teachers, and dissonance occurs. This, of course, severely diminishes the quality of the supervisor-teacher interaction during instructional conferences.

Implications

As noted earlier, the number of studies of micropolitical processes and structures in education has increased rapidly during the last several years. Although a wide range of topics has been explored (Blase, 1991), the study of such processes and structures in supervisor-teacher interaction has been virtually ignored in the supervision literature. The descriptive and conceptual results of the present study represent an initial effort to redress this problem and to advance work in an area that appears to be critically important to understanding instructional conferences.

More studies of the strategies, goals, purposes, and consequences of political interaction in the instructional conference are needed. Research on the relationship between school organization factors and micropolitical interaction in conferences would be valuable. Studies focusing on changes in micropolitical interaction over time in conferences would also be useful. Additional work might compare and contrast the micropolitical aspects of conferences varying by participant experience, ethnicity, gender, class, and language. More broadly, the phenomenon of instructional conferring should be

studied within the social, cultural and academic -- as well as political -- context of the school. Finally, investigations into additional elements of successful conferences (e.g., the supervisor's preparation and skills vis-à-vis factors and, more important, the participants' interpretation of the use of micropolitical strategies) should be initiated.

On a practical level, students would benefit from university programs that provide academic preparation in micropolitical knowledge and skills. Such preparation could focus on building awareness in participants of the range of strategic interactions that tend to occur in conferences and the consequences of such actions. For example, prospective or practicing supervisors should become cognizant of their everyday political orientations; understanding the elements of trust, respect, and support as well as the nature of professional collaboration and reflection would be helpful to constructing effective supervisory practice. Further micropolitical understandings could be derived from observing conferences in an interactive mode and developing awareness of the interplay of strategies, purposes, and consequences.

Perhaps most important is that supervisors should be made aware of the differences between control-oriented strategies and empowerment strategies. Most supervisors are prepared to use only standard evaluation systems and procedures (as opposed to growth-oriented, collaborative interactions based on non-threatening classroom observation and data-gathering), that

encourage them to assume a control orientation. To reduce the salience of such an orientation, it would be useful to focus on the effects of supervisory behavior on teacher performance and student achievement. With current school restructuring efforts emphasizing collegiality and power sharing, understanding both control and empowerment will be especially critical. Without such awareness and knowledge, supervisors may inadvertently undermine attempts to build new and dynamic forms of collegial, professional interaction in public schools.

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	STRATEGY			
	Use of Participants' Personal Orientations	**Use of Conversational Congruence**	**Use of Formal Authority**	**Use of Situational Variables**
RELATED FACTORS	Cognitive Framework opinions & beliefs individual philosophy personal expectations achievement motivation Affective Framework praise success shared values moral commitments purposes Interpersonal Histories shared events knowledge experiences Individual Agendas congruence on instructional goals & objectives	Shared Meanings instructional approaches, concepts, ideas Shared Assumptions how to work with children purpose of conference Semantic Congruence jargon, terms, references Professional Credibility expertise experience	Role Expectations fulfilling traditional roles Social Proximity or Distance familiarity informality Status equality of participants Rewards reinforcement feedback	Place & Physical Arrangement Time to Confer Teaching Resources and Materials Policy Requirements Topic Control

Table 1. Political elements of instructional conference interaction: Strategies and related factors used by conference participants that facilitate or constrain interaction